

TODAY'S CHALLENGE TO THE COLLEGE GRADUATE

(An address by Lotus D. Coffman at the Commencement exercises of the University of Michigan, June 22, 1931)

All commencement addresses are supposed to begin by declaring that we are living in a new world. I do not propose to break with that tradition. I have seen life transformed during my lifetime. My boyhood was spent on a farm and in a small town. I can remember seeing my own grandmother dip tallow candles; I have seen her card the wool, spin the yarn, knit the socks. My own mother quilted quilts; made clothing for the family, did the baking; while on the farm the reaping was done with the sickle, the cradle and the dropper; we cut our own wood, split our own rails, cleaned our grain, and in a thousand ways found employment from sun-up until dark. There were no telephones, no good roads, no automobiles, no chain stores (in fact, the country peddler drove by our farm every week and exchanged coffee, sugar, and gingham for our eggs and butter and my game.)

The community in which I grew up was typical of the rest of the United States. It was characterized by personal initiative, individual enterprise, community pride, and the disposition on the part of every one to work. These are the social forces that have built America.

Now in that same community modern machinery is found on the farms, men work fewer hours per day, macadam roads lead in every direction, automobiles and telephones are found in every home, and radios in most of them; chain stores and a chain creamery occupy permanent sites in the town, and soon the banks will be a part of a chain banking system. There is more activity, more moving of materials, more organization of forces and processes. The community thinks it is a progressive community, and it is.

These changes have come, of course, with the development of mechanical power, which emancipated man from much of his ancient drudgery. Men differ enormously in their views as to what this

means to mankind. Certain it is that machines have increased man's productive power on the one hand and apparently multiplied his wants on the other. The luxuries and superluxuries of yesterday are ordinary commodities of today. New occupations and new trades have been created. The more we produce the more the advertiser insists we need. It seems that everything, when once made, must be sold and used - radios must be listened to, movies seen, chewing gum chewed, cigarettes smoked, and cosmetics spread on the cheeks and lips. Not thrift but greater spending, not saving but more selling, are ideals that have displaced those of my boyhood days.

The coming of the machine has been accompanied by a disappearance of craftsmanship. Strange things are happening in America. Oriental rugs are manufactured in Philadelphia, Sicilian, Grecian and Turkestan art is being duplicated at various places in this country; antique furniture will be made for you while you wait; the linens, laces, luncheon cloths and the like, formerly produced in the Russian and Belgian households with artistic

accuracy and beauty, are now being produced in manufacturing plants. Hand production is so slow that we are unwilling to wait for it. We want everything and we want it now. Now we have mass production, which crystallizes things in single designs and puts a brake on experiment and personal initiative. It speeds up the processes of production but slows down the creative effort of the common man.

The spirit of the machine with its tendency toward mass output and standardization, has invaded every field. Mergers and vast organizations of capital and enterprise abound everywhere. Even the professions have not escaped. The doctors have organized for diagnosis and treatment - that oldfashioned family physician with his deep understanding of human nature and his comforting smile, has almost disappeared; the independent editor is being absorbed by the syndicate paper; lawyers have organized themselves to fit in with the new scheme of life; even professors have become members of protective associations. The rural merchant is

disappearing, and the farmer he serves is being drawn into a vast social organization.

As Mr. Beard and others in *WHITHER MANKIND* declare, the most striking characteristic of modern times is the omnipotence of the collective man as contrasted with the feebleness of the individual man. And yet the forces that have shaped history in the past have had to do with the worth of the individual, with his knowledge, his aspirations, his dreams, with his self expression for achievement, for liberty to live his own life, to shape his own thought, to express his own opinions, to be the center of his own personal world. More recently the tide of human interests has been away from the creative things of art, poetry, philosophy and religion, in the direction of great organizations of capital and industry.

Youth seldom establish themselves in business any more. Instead they get jobs where their success often depends on their speed rather than on their knowledge and creative ability.

Indeed initiative may be regarded as a sign of inefficiency.

The danger is that increasing thousands will fall victim to routine types of work and develop routine types of mind. Efficiency is the modern pagan god before whom we bow in order that dividends may be paid. There are millions of us just now who are wondering if we have not been worshipping too blindly at the shrine of this modern deity; at any rate, we have suddenly discovered that he is no longer able to pay us our dividends.

It was the late Dr. E. E. Slosson, director of Science Service, who declared that in our civilization the mechanical forces have got ahead of the moral and intellectual forces. He said that modern man is like the Arabian fisherman who liberated from the bottle genii he did not know how to control.

Stuart Chase comes forward with this provoking statement: "This is the last great adventure - the boldest, most exhilarating, most dangerous adventure that ever challenged the intelligence and spirit of mankind. From our brains have sprung a billion wild

horses, now running wild and almost certain sooner or later to run amuck. Where are the riders with the whirling rope; where are the light-hearted youth to mount, be thrown, and rise to mount again?"

How difficult this will be for youth, for its view of the world is different from that of its immediate ancestors.

The older generation is dwelling in thought in one area and acting in another, while the younger generation finds itself facing the new wilderness which science has produced without many of the traditions of the older generation.

What shall happen in America and throughout the world seems to be largely a matter of psychology. The gods never sense danger so long as man aspires to divinity by the spiritual route, but they begin to raise their Olympic eyebrows when material prosperity is counted upon to blaze a new path to heaven.

And that I fear has been the ambition of most of the human race in recent years and what a price we are now paying for it!

The people of the earth find it difficult to turn from a life of gambling to one of toil, and to make matters worse they find less toil to engage in. Poverty and misery and unemployment stalk abroad in the midst of plenty. The bed-time story of many of the captains of industry whose feet have suddenly become mired in the clay they themselves have produced, is a story that sends mankind after ever disappearing and constantly recurring economic rainbows. Fitful spurts of artificial prosperity, without the development of a constructive program based upon sound policies, will only involve us the more deeply in the approaching maelstroms of tomorrow.

When one views the world situation he finds little hope in it. Apparently the political leaders are interested in preserving and in developing still further the spirit of nationalism. No government has been willing to make any vital changes in its policies in the interest of international good will. Political instability and national insecurity prevail everywhere. With revolutions in Spain, Portugal, Argentine, Nicaragua, Bolivia,

Peru, Brazil, turmoil in China, unrest in India, a dictatorship in Italy, Hittlerism in Germany, Communism in Russia, the diplomats and statesmen have little to show for their efforts. Major tensions exist between France and Germany, Germany and Poland, France and Italy, Russia and the rest of the world. Men talk less happily about peace than they did a few years ago. More money is being spent for armament, except by Great Britain, than was spent in 1925 and this, someone has said, is the barometer of international temptation.

The governments of the world are at the crossroads.

Government by expedient rather than principle based upon a well-ordered program is the order of the day. The people in their frantic anxiety are seeking relief and help for an intolerable situation through government action. Their despair expresses itself in desperation. And governments do not know how to deal with many of the questions with which they are faced.

The things men want are protection for their homes, security of position, education for their children and the comforts

that science can bring to them. These things they are willing to work for; these things they will undertake to have even if they have to obtain them in some other way. Communism in its various forms will not be held at bay by negative actions and attempts at government regulation; instead there must be positive action and constructive programs if we are to be spared the consequences of outbreaks of violence.

In the dark days of October 1929, when the era of illusive prosperity came to an end, and economic disaster and unemployment settled down over the nations of the earth, we began to appreciate more vividly than before how deeply and intimately our welfare is involved with that of the rest of the world. We Americans sometimes delude ourselves with the pleasant thought that we are secure in our isolation when the most patent fact of current history is the interdependence of the nations of the earth.

Now we are giving hasty and superficial consideration to the causes of the debacle. The machine order of civilization,

over-production, under-consumption, and a dozen other shiboleths were at once raised into bolder relief in our discussions. No satisfactory explanation or solution has been offered as yet. We are still dealing with these vital issues on the basis of emotion. We are impatient with and intolerant of the methods of the intellect. Whim and caprice and the phantasies of the moment often control our actions more than solid facts and demonstrated procedures. We prefer to trust to "hunches" rather than informed opinion.

When our emotion becomes militant then we hear the voice of the crusader vociferating against everything with which he does not agree. Militant intolerance is the kind that invites the world to consume our goods but tells it to consume its own at home. It inveighs against Russia's lack of religion and certain moral standards but smiles deprecatingly and sardonically at Reno where there are now so many prospective divorcees that they must live in tents. It frowns upon nationalism but practices it with a vengeance here at home. Thinking men maintain that nothing

will ever arouse us to the necessity of larger allegiances except a challenge to democracy itself. And that challenge may be coming.

How important it is that we give special attention to this thought just now, for America walks in uncertainty and fear and yet holds a key position among the nations of the earth. The danger of position resides in the misuse of power. The more strength we have the more we are tempted. This is as true of nations as of individuals. If nations go to pieces, indeed if a civilization goes to pieces, it will not be because of weakness but of abused strength. The disasters of history have been caused by the strong rather than by the weak nations. Ultimate victory to a nation never comes from prestige, power, wealth, or empire. These are the forces that produce disintegration. Not swagger, superciliousness, arrogance, or aloofness but rather the quality which St. Paul meant when he said, "I know how to abound," is the quality essential to success. The practice of it is the practice of the highest of the arts. America needs to cultivate it. In her strength lies greatest danger.

At a time when we are facing the greatest of crises Americans are seeking substitutes for intelligence. They are promising with the future and dealing with the things nearest at hand. They are following or trying to follow the paths that are most attractive and alluring. They are modifying their conceptions of the values of life with the shifting winds of expediency. The truth is the chief weakness of a democratic people is its unwillingness or inability to set up remote goals and to strive to attain them. In a country where you have one hundred and twenty million persons each exercising his kingly qualities, special training, expert service and common sense find it hard to get a hearing. The only solution we have for most of our problems is to wait for time, the tide of affairs and some fortuitous combination of circumstances.

The most popular American substitute for intelligence is the appointment of committees. Let a group of Americans be together long enough, talk long enough, reach a certain state of exhaustion and they will appoint a committee to consider the thing they are

talking about. They always place on their committee a number of persons who are not expected to know anything about the thing they are expected to report upon. They insist that the committee shall be open-minded. Its members start in with open minds and usually finish with their minds still open.

If there was ever a time when we needed to pay a duty to intelligence that time is now. With the methods we have used thus far we have not been able to avert war, to free ourselves from superstition and fear, to banish hatred and prejudice, nor to eliminate poverty. And we are facing a new kind of slavery. It is the slavery that grows out of a surplus of leisure for which we are not prepared biologically or by education. Man was meant for a life of activity; in an environment of leisure he begins to degenerate. L. P. Jacks recently said, "The evils of enforced leisure are almost as bad as the evils of enforced labor, and it really is a new form of slavery."

It is possible that the universities may have been partly responsible for the over-emphasis which the substitutes for intelligence have received. At any rate they cannot claim that they taught the graduates of yesterday what they now need to know about economics and international relations. Perhaps they did not know themselves. But in that failure lies a partial explanation of our present world situation. A university that is mortgaged to the past and reaches aimlessly to the future, serves no useful purpose, nor can it be condoned for its failure to provide the leaders it claimed it was training.

There is no good reason why our universities should stand helpless at such times. Others may seek to prevent the recurrence of the plague that hangs like a pall over us by legislation or the use of some other substitute for intelligence, but educated men and educational institutions may do much by gathering the facts and courageously imparting the information relating to such problems, to drive fear and terror from the hearts of those who do not know how to emancipate themselves. Now is a time to consider hard realities.

One of the ablest business leaders stated the matter well the other day when he said: "The need is for leadership, sympathetic in its understanding, tolerant in its viewpoint, and dynamic in its courage."

The subject of this address is TODAY'S CHALLENGE TO THE COLLEGE GRADUATE. Thus far I have made no reference to it. Outside the cloistered walls of universities and colleges there is hunger and want and distress; throughout the earth there is insurrection and misunderstanding; prosperity, universal peace, tolerance, international good will, are still dreams to be realized; the conflict between freedom and initiative on the one hand, and submission and control on the other, between personal liberty and some form of human slavery, has been raised to a new magnitude and power. We are faced with a challenge that is peremptory and ominous. The time has arrived when faith needs to be testified to in works. The performance of these works calls for broadmindedness, an openmindedness, a progressive and enlightened liberalism. A distinguished leader of

American thought recently declared, "that stubborn resistance to betterment may well be the first step toward catastrophe!"

The world's problems now imperviously crying out for solution, are the challenge to the college graduate. It is he presumably who has been prepared for the coming hour.